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Money & Careers

Another (Yawn) Kennedy Book

THE KENNEDY BOOK industry seems to get a new lease on life every time you start to imagine there can't possibly be anything left to be made up or told "as never before" about this family.

If they weren't so rich and if so many of them didn't court their legends as assiduously as they court their privacy, you could feel sorry for them. By now I suppose they have rhinoceros hides. Today, it's hard to conceive that 30 years ago Jackie was going ballistic to censor a book as innocuous as William Manchester's "Death of a President."

The nation needs another \$25 hardbound Kennedy book like Northern California needs another inch of rain, but William Morrow, betting the nation's thirst for Jackie gossip is infinite, has just published "Jackie After Jack." And it is a horse race whether it excels more for its tiresome writing or its unknowable sourcing. So much of the real dirt it shovels is attributed to people who are either dead or anonymous. There is little excuse for this since Jackie is no longer around to put a social curse on any of her friends who blab about her.

To save you buying it, here's what it amounts to: Jackie had a mustache, affairs with Bobby Kennedy, Warren Beatty, Marlon Brando and others too numerous to believe, and, after her husband's assassination, briefly became a lush when she wasn't pumped up on steroids and amphetamines. Lyndon Johnson went bananas at his swearing-in and had to be slapped in the face by a general who is now conveniently dead.

Jackie's queenly legend will survive this latest

onslaught because, after all, if marrying Aristotle Onassis didn't make her trailer trash, what will? Besides, if you bought all the Kennedy books you'd have a collection the size of the Harvard Classics. Who has time for them? The amazing thing is how few of the salacious books rise to the level of high-class trash and how few of the serious or adoring ones rise to any level at all.

The serious exceptions might include Dick Reeves' 1993 book "President Kennedy: Profile of Power." And of the gossip books, none either rises or sinks to the level of Mary Barelli Gallagher's very believable "My Life with Jacqueline Kennedy," published in 1969. Writing in the style of a cat's paw dipped in syrup, Jackie's White House secretary described her job as one-third salt mine and two-thirds a search for new ways for Jackie to both spend and save money. It is a classic, as trash goes.

But to my mind, no Kennedy book ever achieved the literary merit of Frank Saunders' "Torn Lace Curtain," in which Rose Kennedy's chauffeur, a former bookie, evokes Kennedy life through the unselfserving eye of a born Irish storyteller. When President Kennedy first met Frank, knowing he'd been hired out of family concerns that Rose, a notoriously incompetent driver, would run over somebody on the way to daily mass, he said, "Well, Frank, you'll be in a

constant state of grace." Unfortunately, Frank's book sank like a rock in 1983, either because Holt, Rinehart and Winston promoted it badly, it just wasn't mean enough or, and I suspect this was the real reason, it was the only Kennedy book ever written that rang true on every page. Its pictures of Rose's obsessive, not to say psychotic, frugality are priceless. In his scenes at Hyannis Port, Kennedys become real people — Ethel always screaming, "Frank, get the dogs," and the evening movies in Joe Kennedy's basement when the perpetually drunken Judy Garland screamed obscenities at Frank because old Joe Kennedy was too cheap to replace the ancient projector that always broke down.

Of them all, though, no Kennedy book had greater potential and sank to lower squalor than Seymour Hersh's recent "The Dark Side of Camelot," which, I suppose, has Little Brown wondering why it published it. It might have been titled "How the Free World Managed to Be Adequately Led by a Charming Sex Maniac." Poor Seymour must have thought his bombshell "revelation" that Marilyn Monroe was a no-good gold digger who blackmailed Jack Kennedy into setting up a trust fund for her doddering mother would carry an otherwise thinly researched book to spectacular commercial success. Alas, the document proving all this turned out to have been typed on a typewriter manufactured long after Marilyn died.

In the end, this leaden book self-destructed. I guess it was because the "dark" side of Camelot didn't seem all that dark or surprising or provable to a lot of people and because the humorless Hersh never realized what a good book he didn't write.



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